

# FORCE OF HABITS

Why a growing number of people are getting into the Acts for a new way of worshipping.

By Andrew Humphries

It's 11am on a Friday in early June and a group of Banyule Network of Uniting Churches members are meeting online as part of a regular weekly gathering.

It has become a favourite part of the week for them as they embrace a different type of worship and prayer.

In fact, group member David Campbell says he feels a real loss if he is unable to attend "virtually" each week for any reason.

Guiding group members is a form of discipleship known as Holy Habits, which has taken the world by storm since its publication in January 2018.

Created by United Kingdom Methodist

Minister Andrew Roberts and available as a book and through other resources, Holy Habits provides a fresh impetus for, and reimagining of, worship, based on the Book of Acts 2:42-47, in which Luke outlines a picture of what the church should represent.

Based on Luke's words, Holy Habits encourages the 10 disciplines, or habits, of biblical teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, eating together, gladness and generosity, serving, worship, sharing resources, prayer and making more disciples.

Spend time online with Banyule's Rev Sandy Brodine and members of the Holy

Habits group and it quickly becomes obvious what a dramatic and positive impact it has had on them.

As an example, Sandy offers the Holy Habit of fellowship, which played a crucial role as members dealt with a number of issues during 2020.

"A few of us had some pretty awful stuff going on within our families and last year was pretty difficult," Sandy says.

"One of the Holy Habits that we worked on quite a lot was offering fellowship, or hospitality, to each other in the way we support and listen to one another in our struggles."

Group member Kathy Glenister opens

up about a deeply personal experience to illustrate exactly what Holy Habits, and weekly interaction with the group, meant to her last year.

"Just before I started with the group last year, we found out that my granddaughter needed to have open-heart surgery," Kathy says.

"She was coming up to the age of five at the time, and we were just recovering from the fact her older brother had also needed open-heart surgery about 14 months earlier.

"This absolutely rocked our world and my life was peppered with all of that and other issues, so one of my friends

**"IT DOESN'T ALWAYS GEL WHEN YOU PULL PEOPLE TOGETHER BUT THE RESPECT AND REVERENCE THAT I HAVE FELT WITHIN THIS GROUP HAS BEEN VERY POWERFUL."**

**Kathy Glenister**

scooped me up and said 'I think (Holy Habits) might be a good idea for you'."

And, as Kathy recalls, the group itself became her own Holy Habit.

"The connection, support, love and nurturing space it offered sustained me throughout the year, in ways which I probably still can't put into words," Kathy says.

"It was amazing for me, everybody is so naturally pastoral and nurturing and it's not often you are able to find that.

"It doesn't always gel when you pull people together and we have all come from different backgrounds, but the respect and reverence that I have felt within this group, for each other and the group as a whole, has been very powerful."

The group member who "scooped"

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Kathy up during her time of need was Jennifer Gibbons, who, like Kathy, has found Holy Habits offers a great sense of comfort during difficult times.

“This group became a sanctuary and place of recovery for me,” Jennifer, who went through rehab last year after a knee replacement, says.

In its own way, the Holy Habits group became the best possible form of rehabilitation for her.

“Over the period we have been meeting on Zoom, all group members have been on incredible journeys that none of us really expected to happen when we first gathered at the beginning of March last year,” Jennifer says.

“It’s amazing how we seem to be intuitively connected to each other in this group.”

“I lead another Holy Habits group on a Wednesday evening, but I see this group as my home.”

It’s a home, say all members, which is full of warmth and great fellowship.

David also recalls how the group sustained him during a tough time last year.

“I was searching for an answer to something around contentment in relation to my own health, and the health of my brother,” he says.

“Yes, it was a deep search and I put aside, for a while, some of my ego and was able to find a stillness and some answers (through the group).”

In a Zoom session with group members last year, Andrew outlined how his involvement with the Fresh Expressions movement in the UK was the beginning of Holy Habits.

Fresh Expressions are essentially new forms of church that have emerged within contemporary culture and engage primarily with those people who don’t “go to church”.

“In 2004, I joined the UK’s national Fresh Expressions team, under the leadership of Steven Croft and then Graham Cray, which was an immense honour and privilege,” Andrew told Banyule members.

“So for over eight years I worked across all of the UK encouraging the development of Fresh Expressions



in churches, and I know that was something that made its way to Australia.”

During Andrew’s time at Fresh Expressions, Steven, now the Bishop of Oxford, encouraged him to undertake further study through a Master of Arts course.

“One of the modules was on the Book of Acts and involved writing an essay in response to the question: ‘To what extent do we see the picture that Luke presents in Acts 2:42-47 reappearing in fresh expressions of church today?’,” Andrew recalls.

While he didn’t realise it at the time, his answer to that question and, more

broadly, what was happening around Fresh Expressions, laid the groundwork for what would become Holy Habits.

“Fresh Expressions was certainly the catalyst for Holy Habits,” Andrew says.

“During those years I spent a lot of

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**Andrew Roberts**

time in and around Fresh Expressions and those leading them.

“In these new Christian Communities it was very apparent that the model of Church that Luke presents in Acts 2:42-47 was reappearing.

“In the UK at least there was a

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Left to right: Kathy Glenister, Jennifer Gibbons and David Campbell. Image: Nicole Cleary

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feeling that the thinking around Fresh Expressions was strong in a missional sense but weaker in an ecclesiastical one, and this was a point Steven Croft made when he was Fresh Expressions team leader.

"I became convinced that the model that Luke offers was ideal for those seeking to form new Christian communities today."

Andrew admits, though, that there was no grand plan around what he put down on paper for his essay.

"I only thought at the time that I was doing something that contributed to my Masters degree," Andrew recalls.

"But I then got some very kind responses to the essay and it was published in a theological journal and I had a kind of inkling that there might be more to it.

"So a few years later I had a sabbatical and had three months to do as I chose and I thought maybe it was time to have a go at developing this idea more fully and putting a book together around it, and that's how the Holy Habits book came to be."

Sandy first heard of Holy Habits when she attended an international Messy Church conference in the UK in 2019 and was lucky enough to hear Andrew speak.

She knew instinctively Holy Habits was something that could work well within the Banyule network and there are now six separate groups, three of which run continuously.

The beauty of Holy Habits, Sandy says, is that each group's members can explore it in their own way.

"The model is that we have different groups of people trying different things in different ways, rather than a one-size-fits-all model," Sandy says.

"The purpose is around helping the whole group, and everybody in the church really, to grow their own sense of discipleship by using the Holy Habits to actually deepen their own faith.

"It's not really about, 'oh, let's read this book and we will know more about stuff', it's an exercise in changing who you are on a much deeper kind of level."

Banyule members' experience around what Holy Habits offers reflects Andrew's

own vision of what it can offer to both new and existing faith communities.

"For newly forming communities, Holy Habits offers a vision for and model of what that community could and should be," he says.

"For existing communities, (it offers) a helpful means of audit and the challenge to be renewed.

"Quite rightly, people point out that there is essentially nothing new in Holy Habits, which I think is one of its strengths.

"It's not a fad or fashion but a timeless way of forming disciples and Godly community – even arguably being human.

"But as such, it needs to be continually renewed by the life-giving breath of the Spirit."

## **"THE PURPOSE IS AROUND HELPING THE WHOLE GROUP, TO ACTUALLY DEEPEN THEIR OWN FAITH."**

**Rev Sandy Brodine**

So, how then, is Holy Habits best utilised by faith communities?

The answer to that, says Andrew, revolves around the level of commitment each member is prepared to put into it.

"I hesitate to use this word as it is in danger of being 'conference speak', but the answer is 'intentionally,'" he says.

"Luke is a very deliberate writer and it is instructive that he begins the Acts passage 2:42-47 by saying, 'They devoted themselves to ...'

"Research has shown that when it comes to forming disciples and churches, the primary human determinant of growth and fruitfulness is that of devotion or commitment.

"Resource providers will queue up to convince us of the efficacy of their materials but these will always be secondary to the quality of commitment."

Once that commitment is demonstrated, though, it opens up endless possibilities.



"I often talk about Holy Habits as a gift and the thing with gifts is it is up to the recipient of the gift to decide what they do with it," Andrew says.

"The resources are offered to help people explore this way of living that Luke pictures for us, but they are deliberately very light on directions.

"The first thing we know about God in the Bible is that He is creative, so tap into that creativity and go on an adventure."

Andrew modestly suggests even he has been taken aback by how Holy Habits has been embraced by communities worldwide.

"There have been a lot of surprises and I think the first one is that it has sold as well as it has," Andrew told Banyule group members last year.

"I am not a natural author and I always say that I am more of an assembler of

## **"IT'S GREAT FOOD FOR THE SOUL, BUT IT'S ALSO ABOUT FINDING A PLACE WHERE YOU'RE ACCEPTED AS YOU ARE."**

**Mary Whiteside**

material, so this was a real challenge for me.

"I have, quite frankly, been staggered at how people have responded to Holy Habits."

But respond they have, in large numbers around the world - in fact, even the Bishop of New York is a Holy Habits devotee.

"When the Bishop came to Britain to do a tour of the historic sites of John, he popped into the oldest Methodist building in the world in Bristol and saw a number of copies of Holy Habits there," Andrew says.

"He liked the look of it, took it back to New York and then ordered 2000 copies of it."

That proved to Andrew that he was on the right track with Holy Habits.


"That, to me, was another powerful lesson of just letting the Holy Spirit breathe through things, rather than trying to over-organise," he says.




# 10 STEP GUIDE

## THE 10 HOLY HABITS


### BIBLICAL TEACHING

 Holy Habits is about practising doing holy things until they become instinctive. With this habit, it is particularly important to both explore it and live it. We can explore biblical teaching on our own, and even better together.


### FELLOWSHIP

 Fellowship invokes images of close, supportive, personal relationships, including: small groups of mutual care and sharing and times of prayer, study and conversation with fellow Christians, as well as being nurtured in our spiritual lives through the encouragement and companionship of our friends in the Christian community.


### BREAKING BREAD

 This exploration of breaking bread works with a broad understanding of the term: one that includes and honours the practice of Holy Communion, but reflects upon breaking bread in other ways and contexts too – ways that also make Jesus known.


### EATING TOGETHER

 At first glance, the Holy Habit of eating together seems like an easy one. Many of us enjoy eating together with family and friends and eating together is often a regular feature of church life. But this Holy Habit invites us to do more than simply consume food. It invites us to explore how we eat together and with whom.


### GLADNESS AND GENEROSITY

 Gladness and generosity go together in this Holy Habit because they are inextricably linked. A generously forgiving and trusting nature is often – though not necessarily – a cheerful one. But the root of giving that is generous and cheerful is thankfulness, as we realise what God has done for us and respond with gladness and joy.


### SERVING

 Serving is a Christlike way of living. In exploring this habit, it will be important to both honour and support those who serve day by day in all sorts of ways.


### WORSHIP

 There is a risk that we think of worship only as something that happens when Christians gather for an hour or two. While gatherings are a habit to be encouraged, there is much more to worship than this.


### SHARING RESOURCES

 True sharing is about working together in an open, honest and thoughtful manner without any hidden agendas. Sharing can be costly and demanding but it is a way to a life-giving and transformational experience.

### PRAYER

 Prayer is a foundational and transformative Holy Habit, a way of being, the breath of life. It reorientates us in right relationships with God, with others and the world. It is an antidote to the selfishness of sin.

### MAKING MORE DISCIPLES

 It's not our job to bring people to faith, but we are called to share our faith at school, in our places of work and leisure, and in the communities in which we live.

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“More importantly, there have been delightful stories and surprises around Holy Habits in terms of lives changed, communities coming together and new churches being formed around it, and that is the stuff that really matters.”

And when it comes to changing lives, Sandy knows exactly what a difference an act inspired by one of the Holy Habits can make.

In this case, it's the Holy Habit of sharing resources in the community.

“One of the members in Jennifer's group has had a lot to do with prison fellowship through her family for many years,” Sandy says.

“They were part of a project called Angel Tree at Christmas that provides presents for the children of prisoners.

“Angel Tree buys gifts for the children and prisoners write the cards, but obviously that was a bit more tricky to do than usual last year.

“So, a number of people got together and we got donations from across the network and bought the gifts, and there was a real sense of a number of different groups coming together as part of that project. We're trying to make people aware that when we do that it's a faith response and a response to who God calls us to be.”

Asked to reflect on the success of Holy Habits, Andrew has a simple answer around what he is most proud of.

“(I think it's about) the stories of blessing, growth and renewal across a great range of ages, contexts, countries

and denominations and the number of people who have been involved in developing the supporting resources,” he says.

But perhaps the last word should go to Banyule group member Mary Whiteside, whose analogy brilliantly sums up the fact that Holy Habits offers something for everyone, in many different ways.

“It's great food for the soul, but it's also about finding a place where you're accepted as you are,” Mary says.

“Someone can be like an ant and they can wade in the same pool in which an elephant can swim.

“You can be of vastly different abilities, but still feel part of a community and, in that sense, it has been very meaningful to me.”